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ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine®

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a NEW detective story by
JACK RITCHIE

At one point the detective-narrator says, "Mr. Hudson, you tell an interesting story." Interesting? Yes, indeed. But more than that—bizarre; and more than that—disturbing. After all, Mr. Hudson admitted he would close his eyes and search the universe for the kernel of existence; it's elusive, you know . . .

THE THIRD-FLOOR CLOSET
by **JACK RITCHIE**

When A. E. Williams discovered that Bertha Malloy was dead, he phoned the police.

I cut the siren of our squad car as Jennings and I turned up the long winding driveway and drove past the large well-tended lawn. We parked in the oval in front of the big house, behind two vans, both of which had *A. E. Williams Estate Services* lettered on their sides.

A covey of men and women, all of them in tan work uniforms, were waiting and Williams was their spokesman. "I just didn't know what to do in a situation like this. It's never happened to us before. And as far as I know, Mr. Hudson is in Europe or someplace. Maybe I should have called a doctor, but I don't know who Mrs. Malloy's doctor is and I don't know if it's appropriate to call in a strange doctor. And besides, Mrs. Malloy is quite dead, so a doctor couldn't have done anything anyway." He dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. "I imagine she died of a heart attack."

He led us into the house and through a huge kitchen to a small suite at its far end.

Bertha Malloy reclined in an easy chair, staring sightlessly ahead. She was a large woman, perhaps five foot ten and close to 200

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pounds. I estimated her age at about 40.

Williams was at my elbow. "Mrs. Malloy is—was Mr. Hudson's housekeeper." And then he explained his own presence. "I am Andrew E. Williams, of A. E. Williams Estate Services. We come here periodically to clean the house from top to bottom. Not that there's really much to do, what with Mr. Hudson gone all the time and the house empty. And we see to it that the grass is cut, hedges trimmed, and so on.

"This morning when we showed up at eight, Mrs. Malloy met us at the door like always and we went to work. At noon, when we take our lunch break, we all go to the kitchen where Mrs. Malloy always has coffee waiting. We supply our own food, but freshly brewed coffee is always welcome.

"Only this time there wasn't any coffee. And the door to her suite was open and she was just sitting there. So I spoke to her, but she didn't answer, and I saw how her eyes were open and her jaw sagging and—" He shuddered. "Well, she was dead."

I agreed. "Could anyone give us the names of some of Mrs. Malloy's relatives? I suppose one of the regular servants might have that information?"

"There are no other servants. Just Mrs. Malloy. She's sort of a housekeeper and caretaker in one, you might say. No household staff at all. That's probably because Mr. Hudson does so much traveling and he couldn't see any point in having a full staff of servants just standing around with nothing to do but collect wages."

"So Mrs. Malloy had the whole place to herself?"

"Yes. I once asked her if she didn't get lonely or afraid being the only one here. But she said she liked being alone and there was nothing to be afraid of. Besides, she had that big revolver."

"Revolver?"

"In that drawer over there. She opened it once to get something and I saw it and asked her about it. She said it was for protection."

I pulled open the drawer. A Colt .38 lay inside. I broke it open and found that one of the cartridges had been fired. I put the gun back. "How long have you been doing cleaning here?"

"Over three years now."

"And you don't know whether Mrs. Malloy has any relatives or where they could be found?"

"I'm afraid not. We used to talk over coffee sometimes, but she was always close-mouthed about some things. Like Mr. Hudson, for instance. But she did mention once that her husband was dead. Fell

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down some stairs and broke his neck. And she has no children. If she has any relatives at all, I don't think they'd be from around here. She had quite a New England accent."

I moved over to a small desk near the window. On its blotter lay two checks. A large house key, evidently used as a paperweight, lay on top of them.

I studied the checks. One was made out to the Municipal Electric Company, apparently in payment of the monthly bill, and the other to Bertha Malloy in the sum of \$4,000. Both of them were dated yesterday and both of them were signed *Jacob Hudson*.

I turned back to Williams. "Are you positive that Hudson isn't in this house?"

"Well . . . I didn't see him anywhere. Neither did any of my people. I just assumed that he was off on a trip again."

"Could he be in the house without you knowing it?"

"I suppose so." Williams frowned. "There's the locked room."

"What locked room?"

"On the third floor. It's always locked. Mrs. Malloy said it was used for storage and we shouldn't ever bother with it."

"What does Hudson look like?"

"I've never seen him in the flesh. Neither has any of my people. But there are photographs around the house. He appears to be a rather small frail man nearing forty."

I picked up the key on the desk. "Let's see if this fits the lock to that third-floor room."

Williams led the way. On the third floor he stopped in front of a door at the end of the corridor. "This is it."

I tried the doorknob and verified that the door was locked. I rapped several times and then said, "This is the police. Is there anyone in there?"

We waited, but there was no answer.

I found that the key I'd brought along did fit and I unlocked the door. We stepped into a small bedroom.

Jennings sniffed the air. "Stale. I'll bet nobody's slept in that bed in years." He glanced around. "It sure doesn't look like a storeroom to me. Why would she want to keep it locked?"

I found that one door on the side of the room led to a bathroom. I tried the door of what I assumed must be the closet. It was locked. I tried my key again, but this time it didn't work.

I spoke to Williams. "Would you have any idea where the key to this closet might be found?"

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"Not the faintest."

I studied the closet door for ten seconds and then made up my mind. "Do you have a hammer and a screwdriver in one of those vans of yours?"

Williams nodded and hurried downstairs. He returned almost immediately with a hammer and a screwdriver.

I used them to tap the hinge pins out of their sockets and Jennings and I pulled the closet door out of its frame.

We found Jacob Hudson.

He lay on a mattress on the floor, a small man under a blanket. His eyes were closed. His sallow complexion indicated plainly that he hadn't seen the sun in some time.

Jennings stared wide-eyed. "Is he alive?" Then he knelt down. "He's breathing, but he looks unconscious. Maybe drugged. We'd better radio for an ambulance."

When the medics arrived, two orderlies lifted Hudson onto a stretcher and carried him down the stairs.

Jennings watched the ambulance pull away. "How long do you suppose she kept him in there? The whole three years nobody's seen him? Why didn't she just kill him?"

I didn't have the answer. "Maybe she just couldn't bring herself to go that far. Or maybe she needed him to sign the checks."

While Jennings radioed headquarters, I went back upstairs with a flashlight and examined the closet. It was just big enough to hold the mattress. The light socket overhead contained no bulb.

Had it been pitch-black in here, or had there been at least a sliver of light from under the door? What had it been like to lie here day after day in the darkness?

I directed the beam of my flashlight around the small room, pausing at a spot above the door frame.

I found something.

When I signed out at headquarters at the end of my shift, I went back to my apartment to make my supper. I detest eating out.

I have been with the Police Department for almost ten years, all of that time in squad cars. My record is good. I am diligent, prompt, and dependable, and I will undoubtedly be promoted to plainclothes in another year or so. And in 15 years more I will retire, probably as a detective-sergeant.

Both of my grandfathers were policemen and one of them retired as a precinct captain. My father was a sergeant when he was killed

in the line of duty while attempting to arbitrate a domestic quarrel.

I have a brother and a sister. Both of them are with the department and I would not be at all surprised if Emily became the first female police chief in the history of our city. She is hard-working, driving, and dedicated.

In short, I come from a police family.

To my brother and my sister, policework is more than a job. It is a way of life. On the other hand, I chose police work because of family pressure and our liberal retirement system.

I had, of course, been thinking about Hudson all day. As far as Jennings and I were concerned, he was no longer our concern. The men in plainclothes would take over the case.

Had they questioned Hudson already? Or had the doctors at the hospital told them that they would have to wait? Had Hudson opened his eyes yet?

When I finished eating, I stacked the dishes in the sink. Usually—during the warm months—I spend the waning hours of the day in my garden.

It is really not much of a plot, certainly not in size. It is 12 by 20 feet and the space was reluctantly allowed to me by my building superintendent. It is bounded on the west by a graveled parking lot and receives a great deal too much shade from surrounding buildings. However, I have made do. The garden has become my place of refreshment, the center of my day.

Today, however, I would do no gardening. Instead I went down to my car and drove to the County General Hospital.

At the main desk I identified myself and Hudson's room number was given to me without hesitation.

I took the elevator to the fourth floor and found room 446. I paused in the open doorway.

Hudson lay on the bed, the coverlet almost up to his chin. His eyes were open and he stared at the ceiling.

When he saw me, alarm flashed in his eyes.

"It's all right," I said. "There's nothing to be afraid of." I moved to a chair beside his bed. "Have you been questioned yet?"

He shook his head. "No. I've been too weak to answer any questions." But he had one of his own. "Mrss. Malloy?"

"She's dead. Possibly a heart attack."

He blinked. "Heart attack? She was only in her late thirties. One wouldn't expect someone that young to die of a heart attack."

"No," I said. "One wouldn't."

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He put a hand over his eyes and I thought that he wasn't going to speak again, but then he said, "She let me out of that closet just twice a day. For a few minutes. To go to the bathroom and to give me my food. And sometimes she would make me sign blank checks. And letters that she'd type. To my relatives to make them think that I was traveling abroad. I suppose she had some kind of a mail-forwarding arrangement so that they would arrive at their destinations with foreign postmarks on them. Checks, letters, even holiday cards. She forced me to sign them all."

"Forced?"

"Yes. She always had a revolver with her." He put his hand over his eyes for a moment again. "It all started about three years ago when I fired her. She was so inefficient and insolent that one day I just gave her notice. Told her that she was fired."

"But the firing didn't take?"

"No. She simply refused to go. She grabbed me bodily and flung me into that closet and locked the door."

"Didn't you try to escape?"

"Of course. But the closet has a solid oak door. I was never able to get hold of tools or implements of any kind. And even when she let me out, by no stretch of the imagination could I have overpowered her. You've seen her, haven't you? Really a big woman."

I nodded again. "About once a month she had some cleaning people come into the house. If you'd made some noises, they might have heard you."

He rubbed his neck. "I never heard them. She must have drugged me when she expected them to come to the house. I remember that sometimes I'd go to sleep and wake with the impression that I had slept a long, long time."

I studied him. "Mr. Hudson, you tell an interesting story."

He brightened. "Really?"

"Unfortunately it isn't a true story."

He eyed me warily.

I pulled two keys from my pocket. "I found these lying on the top of the door frame *inside* the closet. One of them fits the closet door and the other the door to the hallway. In other words, Mr. Hudson, you could get out of that closet—and the house, for that matter—anytime you wanted to."

His face lost what little color it had.

"Somehow you got hold of those two keys. When or where I don't know. You could have gotten out, but you didn't. Why not? Did you

have other plans? Revenge, perhaps? For what Mrs. Malloy had done to you? Did you sneak out and maybe drop something into her food? Something that would kill her?"

He sat up in quick protest. "But that's absolute nonsense. I would never poison anyone. Certainly not Mrs. Malloy. I insist that you perform an autopsy. On Mrs. Malloy, of course. I'm positive that you will find that she died of something perfectly legal." He thought for a moment and then covered another base. "But if she died of poisoning or by some other foul means, I certainly had no part in it."

Funny, but I believed him. I thought there was some other answer to his being in that closet. Something different. Something private. That was why I hadn't shown those keys to anyone else, why I had come here alone. "Why don't you just tell me the truth now, Mr. Hudson. The whole truth."

He closed his eyes to regroup his thoughts and then said, "She was insane."

"Mrs. Malloy?"

"Oh, no. Not Mrs. Malloy. She was in perfect possession of her senses. Very dependable and conscientious. I was referring to my mother. She died six years ago."

He decided to make himself more comfortable by adjusting the hospital bed so that he could sit up with back support. "It all began when I was nine years old. My father was killed in an automobile accident while driving me to a cub scout meeting. I received only superficial bruises. My mother took his death extremely hard and she blamed me for it. After all, it had been my idea to join the cub scouts.

"She had never been the most stable personality to begin with, but now she began having spells. Violent spells during which she would beat me. Thoroughly.

"I tried to keep away from her as much as possible, especially since there was no way to anticipate when one of these spells would occur. And when they did and I wasn't immediately available, she would come looking for me. Literally search the house and usually she found me. I tried hiding place after hiding place without much success until one day I happened on that third-floor bedroom and saw the closet door with the key in the lock. I hid inside the closet, locking the door from the inside.

"Her search brought her into the room. She even tried the closet-door knob, but apparently she assumed that because it was locked, I couldn't have gotten in there in the first place. And she went off

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searching other places until the spell finally wore off."

He sighed. "Of course I could not avoid her entirely. There were times when she would catch me unawares and give me a beating. Once she came into my bedroom in the middle of the night. After that I couldn't sleep in my bed at all. So I moved a mattress and a pillow into the third-floor closet and spent my nights there.

"I tell you, it was a relief to be sent to boarding school. How I dreaded coming home for holidays and vacations, but my mother insisted. And then, after I graduated from college, I was home and available to her at all times."

I interrupted. "You mean that she was still beating you even when you were an adult?"

He smiled faintly. "As you can see, I am barely five feet tall and weigh less than one hundred pounds. My mother was quite a large woman, about the size of Mrs. Malloy. The last time she managed to catch me before I could get to my closet, I was thirty-two years old. That was a month or so before her death. She was run down by a delivery truck in the parking lot of a supermarket."

"Why did you stay here? Why didn't you leave?"

"Frankly, I am psychologically incapable of coping with the outside world. I suppose the beatings had something to do with that. And I had no money in my own name. So I remained here and tried to keep alert."

He smiled again. "I'm ashamed to admit it, but I was elated at her death. I was now *free*. Yes, completely elated. For perhaps two or three days. And then I became—well, restless. So I went upstairs, just to *visit* the closet. And the mattress was still there, and the pillow, and I thought, why don't I just take a nap? As long as I was there anyway, and I was a little sleepy. And so I entered the closet, locked the door, and went to sleep."

He shook his head. "Eventually I had to admit that even though my mother was now dead, the only place where I felt any degree of security was in that closet."

"You should have tried psychiatric help."

"I did. Immediately. And I continued trying for three years. But finally I came to the conclusion that they could not help me. I simply wasn't going to be 'cured.' As the twig is bent, so grows the tree, and I was too old to be rebent. So I said the hell with the psychiatrists."

"And you retreated into the closet?"

"It wasn't quite that simple. You see, there were the servants. I

had been quite circumspect and secretive about my closet, but now that I had decided to make my occupancy full time, so to speak, they would certainly learn about it. And that could lead to all kinds of complications. Word would certainly get out, especially to my relatives. It would be a good bet—more likely a certainty—that they would, out of the kindness of their hearts, see to it that I was committed to an institution. They would also very likely volunteer to administer my estate. No, no. Disappearing into a closet isn't at all as easy as it appears at first glance."

"You discharged the servants?"

"Yes. But I saw to it that all of them got generous severance payments and I also got them other commensurate employment. And to allay suspicions, if they had any, I told them that I had decided to travel extensively and that therefore I did not think it economically sound to retain a full staff."

"But you kept Mrs. Malloy?"

"Actually she wasn't one of the regular staff at all. I had to go looking for her. I wanted someone who could be trusted to run things around here and keep her mouth shut. After all, it was still necessary to keep up the physical appearance of the estate. I couldn't have the grounds going to ruin, with weeds growing tall and that type of thing, because inevitably that would lead to questions and investigations.

"So I went to a detective agency out east and had a search conducted. I interviewed a number of prospects and Mrs. Malloy appeared to be the most suitable. A splendid woman with no relatives. I paid her a handsome salary to run things here and especially to keep her mouth shut."

"And so you spent these last three years in that closet? Coming out only a few minutes a day to take care of some basic functions?"

"In reality, I was out more than that. I'd say that I daily averaged about four hours out and twenty in. I would go downstairs and watch television or read, because a mind unfed is a mind dead. And sometimes on moonlit nights I would stretch my legs by going for a stroll on the back grounds." He chuckled. "One night I forgot to inform Mrs. Malloy that I was going out and she mistook me for an intruder. She took a shot at me with her revolver. She was quite a watchdog, though a poor shot."

I still found the story a bit difficult to believe. "You spent twenty hours a day just lying there in the dark?"

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existence. It's very elusive, you know. And, of course, I suppose that I *did* do an awful lot of sleeping, or trying to. After all, the human brain isn't geared for too much or too severe thinking."

He sighed. "When you began tapping the hinge bolts out of the door, I was utterly terrified. I suspected that something drastic must have happened to Mrs. Malloy. How could I explain my presence in the closet? I had never even *anticipated* that such an occasion might occur. And I didn't dare tell the truth. So I quickly hid those two keys, because I thought that if anyone searched me, the keys would be embarrassing to explain, and then I just went limp."

"Limp?"

"Yes. I thought that was about the most intelligent thing to do under the circumstances. Go limp. Close my eyes and pretend to be unconscious. Play for time until I could find out what was going on and think of some explanation the world could accept. And so, lying here, I put together the story about Mrs. Malloy imprisoning me. I hope, wherever she is, that she will forgive me."

He closed his eyes. "Now I'll be the subject of newspaper stories and magazine articles and I'll be committed to a mental institution."

The eyes opened for a moment of hope. "You don't suppose they'll let me have my own closet?"

It was a beautiful Sunday and I worked in the garden until nearly noon. Then I went inside, washed my hands, and made myself a sandwich.

When I finished eating it, I made another, poured a glass of milk, and put them both, along with three apricots and some vitamin tablets, on a tray.

I took the tray upstairs to the third-floor bedroom and put it on a small table next to the closet door. I rapped twice to let Hudson know that his lunch was ready and the milk cold.

I picked up the two checks he'd signed—one to cover a payment to his book club and the other my salary for the month of July.

It has been nearly a year since I resigned from the Police Department and, as far as Hudson's relatives—or the world, for that matter—are concerned, he is now in India and Sri Lanka.

I would probably see Hudson at ten thirty tonight. The late TV movie was going to be a Western and he was rather partial to John Wayne.

I went back outside into the warm garden.

My closet, I suppose.